THE MAKING OF A MAN
John 21:1-17
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The late Adlai Stevenson lost the Presidential election to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956. The day after that second loss, which was substantial, a reporter asked him how he felt. Mr. Stevenson responded in his typically urbane and witty manner to the effect that he was much too old to cry but that it hurt too badly to laugh. I have always believed that there must be no pain quite like the pain experienced by a defeated political candidate. The investment in money, time, energy and emotion is heavy.

Losing produces pain of a particular kind, and the way to avoid it, of course, is never to run in the first place. The way to prevent disappointment is never to try. Attempt nothing and you will surely accomplish your goal.

Ernest Campbell observes: "Only those who have nursed great expectations can know great disappointment. Only those who have tried hard to win can know the pangs of defeat. Only those who have dared to hope can know the meaning of despair." Appropriate rhetoric - I thought - for the opening week of the baseball season. (Locked In A Room With Open Doors, p.151).

The pain I am describing has two sources. To try something and fail is, first, to be embarassed in the eyes of one's peers. It is to disappoint your friends and to experience shame because you have not lived up to their expectations. Their estimate of your capabilities made you feel good. But now the jury is in, the awful truth is out. You aren't what they thought you were.

The second source is a little more complex. It has to do with your own expectations of yourself. You believed what the others were saying about you. You became confident in your own heart that you could do it. And then you didn't. And long after others have forgotten the election, or score, or who played, you will remember the vote, the margin, or who struck out with the bases loaded. There is pain which results from not living up to one's own self expectations. It has a way of becoming permanent pain. If you are able to keep expecting a lot from yourself you will keep getting hurt, and the temptation to lower your expectations will be very real. Worse yet, there is - I have concluded - a dynamic in all of us that causes us to be better people in the abstract than we ever are in reality, that we never quite live up to our own expectations, and that therefore we live with a kind of ongoing embarassment over our own inadequacies. We are far better parents - as we think about it - than in the actuality of the dinner table conversation. I constantly disappoint myself because my retorts and arguments are absolutely brilliant - after the fact, late at night, or in the automobile. Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite writers, was talking about himself recently when he observed: "Like a child, I feel uneasy in the presence of people who are more grown-up than I am. When people are taking me seriously as a grown-up - listening to me lecture or preach or talking to me about one of my books - I think to myself, if they only knew..." (The Christian Century, 3/12/80 p.282).

And, of course, you have heard the story of the minister who had traveled to another town to preach a very important candidate sermon. When he arrived home his wife asked him how the sermon had gone. He answered: "Which one? The one I prepared, or the one I delivered in the car on the way home - or the one I actually preached?"

Most of us are caught, most of the time, somewhere between our expectations of ourselves and the unvarnished reality of our lives. We know, most of us, with recurring regularity, the pain of failure and the self-inflicted agony which results when we disappoint ourselves.

That dynamic is interesting, not only because we experience the pain, but also because it is important in the process of becoming whole persons and experiencing spiritual health. We are learning, in theological categories, that acceptance of self is the prerequisite to appreciating and loving oneself. We are learning that what the psychological disciplines call self-actualization or self-realization, is not far from what theologians call salvation and, whatever your choice of vocabulary, that it has to do with how you feel about yourself. We are learning that the Biblical sequence is psychologically sound: real joy is loving others, but you can't do that apart from salvation: that is to say, apart from self-acceptance and self-love.

The fascinating story of Simon Peter which is woven into the Gospel narrative is a case in point. We read the conclusion to the first chapter of Peter's story this morning. The rest of the story is heroic - a strong disciple of Jesus Christ in the first century; along with St. Paul, personally responsible for the existence of the church of Jesus Christ: faithful to his death as a martyr which tradition says happened in Rome, by crucifixion, upside down. But the story isn't very heroic in the beginning. In fact, it is so human that readers down through the ages have been able to see themselves in it.

He was a rough Galilean fisherman. He was strong, unpolished, impetuous; dominated by his heart more than his mind. He often acted first and thought about it later. He is no stained glass saint. Peter is a man, a human being, with dirty hands, and tired muscles, and a heart full of love and a very human record of not living up to his own expectations.

When Jesus invited him to follow, Peter did - immediately. He was one of those about whom the Gospel account says simply: "He laid down his nets and followed." He became the sounding board and the spokesman for the others. Along with James and John he was a part of an inner circle which Jesus gathered around himself. Throughout, however, he keeps sounding totally human and he keeps disappointing Jesus, others and himself. When Jesus asked the disciples one time who they thought he was, Peter responded: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But moments later he showed how little he understood by refusing to accept the possibility of Jesus' suffering. He was along on the mountain and experienced, with Jesus, a tremendous confirmation of our Lord's vocation, but then made a tasteless suggestion that they memorialize the moment and the occasion by building three monuments.

Peter was overwhelmed by Jesus' gesture of footwashing and, alone among the disciples, refused to allow Jesus to do it. On that night, the evening of the Last Supper, he, in sequence, demanded to know the identity of the betrayer, promised to die for Jesus if need be - prompting Jesus to predict that Peter would deny Him at least three times before the night was over, fell asleep in the garden while Jesus was praying, cut off the ear of a man among the party of guards who came to arrest Jesus and then, as predicted, three times denied that he knew Jesus when someone challenged him.

Can you imagine the guilt, the deep disappointment in himself, the self-inflicted punishment Peter was experiencing after the crucifixion? His stated expectations were bravery, courage, fidelity. "I will die for you if need be." The blunt reality, however, was represented by the bizarre - one severed ear, and the shameful three consecutive denials. My guess is that Peter, after the crucifixion, was filled to the brim with guilt, shame and something very close to self-hatred. My guess is that he wasn't very pleasant to be around.

That's the man who is fishing in the New Testament lesson this morning. The fourth Gospel has them in Galilee after the crucifixion - wondering what to do next. Peter suggested that they return to the therapeutic familiarity of their work.

So they were one hundred yards off shore in a fishing boat when a voice broke through the early dawn stillness - asking if they had caught anything and advising them to try the other side of the boat. John recognized Jesus and Peter pulled on his tunic, plunged into the water and swam to shore. Nothing else mattered at that moment. All the grief and agony of recent days came welling up to the surface, and with tears pouring down his cheeks I see Peter stumbling through the surf - not thinking about what he might say, but knowing that he had to go see if it really was Jesus, and, I suppose, to confront the reality of what he, Peter, had done. He had denied Jesus, almost betrayed Him, and now, strong man that he was, he wanted the confrontation and whatever condemnation he had coming.

There was a fire and fish were cooking and He had bread. He invited them to join him and as he broke it for them the memory of their last supper burned in each heart. None spoke. There were no apologies, no protestations, no excuses - this time He would speak first and He did - to Peter.

"Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?" More than what? More than fishing, and salt air and good friends? More than these others love me? Peter had denied that he knew Jesus three times and so the question came at him three times. "Peter, do you love me more than these?"

Jesus did not criticize Peter. He never mentioned Peter's miserable failure. He did not increase Peter's guilt by pointing to his cowardice nor, significantly, did He increase Peter's pain by embracing him. Instead, I believe, Jesus was showing Peter the strength of saving love. Peter, I believe, was becoming a man, a whole person on that beach by acknowledging his own dishonesty and lack of nerve, and learning to accept that about himself - and to forgive himself because, incredibly, this man, this Jesus, this Savior, was somehow accepting and forgiving him.

Peter was learning that his standing in the eyes of Jesus, was not based on his past performance, but on Christ's steady love for him. He became a man - a whole man, because of the miracle of grace. In psychological terms he became capable of loving, living fully, by the process of learning to accept, forgive and love himself.

That is no small miracle when it happens. It is easier to forgive others than it is to forgive ourselves. It may seem more noble to love others than to love ourselves. But the truth is that it can't be done. You can't love others until you begin to love yourself. Jesus did not say after all, "Love your neighbor instead of yourself", but "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Your ability to forgive and accept others depends directly on your willingness to forgive and accept yourself. If you don't, the resultant guilt and negative self image will poison the love you want to express to others. There is no more important psychological truth than that.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can love because we are loved, we can accept and forgive because we are accepted and forgiven. That is the end of the first chapter in the story of Simon Peter.

It would be good to stop there. As a mater of fact we often do. But the difference between self-fulfillment in the secular sense, and salvation in the Biblical sense is precisely here. The Gospel of Jesus Christ suggests that the story is only half told at this point. The feeling of salvation is not an end in itself. Love for Jesus Christ moves immediately into the area of feeding sheep.

Our culture is very impressed currently with the feeling of self-acceptance and self-awareness. Self-esteem is the goal of a multitude of new therapies. But the feeling is the end product. Christopher Lasch's excellent work, The New Narcissism, documents how thoroughly - from our bodies, to our minds, to our spirits - we believe that feeling "OK" is the very best we can do. In religion, the same dynamic is reflected. Salvation is, essentially, the highly individualistic feeling of being saved. Lasch writes, "People today hunger for the feeling...the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security." (p.33). "Therapy has established itself as the successor both to rugged individualism and to religion.." (p 42)

Jesus told Peter - "If you love me, feed my sheep." That is to say, the feeling of salvation isn't the point of this exercise at all. The verbal affirmation of love for and loyalty to Jesus Christ is not the point. The point is the feeding of the sheep; the care of the hungry; the healing of the sick; the sheltering of the cold; the comforting of the afflicted; the meeting of the needs of others. That's what salvation is: that is what Christianity is about. And it is the end product of the process that begins with self-acceptance and self-esteem and proceeds through the feeling of wholeness to the outgoing, other-directed life lived for others.

That is the Gospel - it can be our salvation. It is no trivial matter. Many of us spend a lot of our time feeling bad about ourselves. Some of us feel guilty much of the time over things we have done, or things we haven't done. Some of us can't love others at all because we're too busy punishing ourselves. And,tragically,sometimes we do destructive things precisely because we have such a low estimate of ourselves. Sometimes our behavior is self-destructive simply because we can't forgive and don't like ourselves.

I used to think that much of what I just said was psychological abstraction. And then one time I observed how the grace of Jesus Christ, mediated by this passage of scripture, changed a life. A person I knew was involved in something that was causing a great deal of guilt, but hearing the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ, in this passage, summoned the strength to change behavior - not out of guilt, but out of strong and new feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. It was a conversion of the best kind. A life was saved - not in the abstract, certainly not on some television evangelist's score card of souls claimed for Christ, but in the best and honest sense of newness and wholeness and the ability to love honestly restored because there was no need any longer to feel guilty and therefore no need to go on punishing self.

Peter became a whole man when he learned about grace; about his acceptance by Jesus Christ in spite of what he had done. He was, literally, reborn into a new and strong and faithful life when he realized the greatest truth of the Gospel: that wholeness and salvation is not a selfish experience to be savored alone, but a life lived out in love for others; that all the meaning and satisfaction and joy a person needs will derive from feeding the lambs of Jesus.

Amen.

God, we thank you for Your love: for Your risen Son, His strength and grace and forgiveness; for the experience of acceptance which happens between us in Your church; and for the love You continue to call out of us. Thank you, Father, for freedom from guilt - freedom to love confidently, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.